

VZCZCXYZ0003
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHKG #0113/01 0431935
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 121935Z FEB 09
FM AMEMBASSY KINGSTON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7284

UNCLAS KINGSTON 000113

SIPDIS, SENSITIVE

WHA/CAR FOR CODEL ENGEL

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [OVIP](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ETRD](#) [ECON](#) [ASEC](#) [JM](#) [XL](#)
SUBJECT: JAMAICA: SCENE-SETTER FOR CODEL ENGEL

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Post welcomes the visit of CODEL Engel at a time when Jamaica is at a crucial "tipping point." Jamaica faces challenges to its resource-strapped public services sector, crumbling infrastructure, environmental degradation, the spread of HIV/AIDS, an exorbitant debt burden, and high violent crime. There is concern that unchecked levels of crime and corruption, coupled with rising prices and the global economic crisis, could seriously endanger Jamaica's stability.

¶2. (SBU) Prime Minister Bruce Golding's Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) retains a grip on a razor-thin 32-28 parliamentary majority. The charismatic, populist, former Prime Minister, Portia Simpson-Miller, leads the opposition People's National Party (PNP). After eighteen years in power, the PNP finally was ousted by a frustrated public in the September 2007 general election. Nevertheless, the JLP has had a difficult time delivering on campaign promises, having inherited a bloated, inefficient bureaucracy and massive debt burden.

¶3. (SBU) As one of the largest Caribbean nations forming part of the "third border" of the U.S., Jamaica is a key partner on security issues. Trade and migration issues account for much of the solid bilateral relationship with the United States, with environmental and energy issues taking a greater role in recent years. The U.S. remains Jamaica's primary trading partner, and tourism, bauxite/alumina, and remittances account for much of the country's foreign exchange earnings. Remittances have fallen as a result of the global economic crisis, and many worry that tourism will see a sharp decline as well.
End Summary.

Overview

¶4. (SBU) Jamaica, roughly the size of Connecticut, has a population of 2.7 million and a GDP of approximately USD 11.21 million (2007 estimate). It gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1962, and remains a member of the Commonwealth. With its British political and cultural heritage, a relatively educated and entrepreneurial population, and uncommon natural beauty, Jamaica nevertheless has weaknesses in key institutions, a bloated bureaucracy, financial resource constraints, and lackluster (now negative) economic growth. A high crime rate results in considerable security costs that must be borne in doing business, particularly in Kingston.

¶5. (SBU) United States interests in Jamaica largely relate to security, as broadly defined: combating the flow of illegal drugs, strengthening democratic institutions, fostering sustainable economic development, and protecting the environment. An estimated one million or more Jamaicans live in the United States, with over 400,000 in South Florida. Virtually every Jamaican has a family member in New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, or Florida. In addition, over one million U.S. citizens visit Jamaica annually, and assisting them is a primary U.S. Embassy concern. Resources also are directed to encourage U.S. exports and support U.S. investors and businesses.

Political Background

¶16. (SBU) Jamaica has a "Westminster model" parliament consisting of a lower house, the House of Representatives, comprised of 60 directly elected members, and an upper house, a Senate made up of 21 appointees. Power rests largely in the hands of the head of government, the Prime Minister. He and his cabinet (Ministers drawn from Members of Parliament and the Senate) decide government policy.

The British monarch, represented locally by an appointed Governor General, is the largely ceremonial head of state. The two major political parties have historical links with two large trade unions--the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) with the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union (BITU) and the People's National Party (PNP) with the National Workers Union (NWU).

¶17. (U) The PNP won four consecutive general elections up through 2002, retaining control of the government for an unprecedented eighteen years. In March 2006, PNP leader Portia Simpson-Miller became the nation's first female Prime Minister. She remained in office only until September 2007, when the JLP finally regained a majority, albeit a slim one; it was the closest national election in Jamaican history, with only 100 votes separating the contestants in ten of the sixty parliamentary constituencies. Despite some election-related violence and minor irregularities, the vote was largely free and fair, and declared as such by observers from the Organization of American States.

Current Political Landscape

¶18. (SBU) The JLP currently maintains 32 out of the 60 parliamentary seats. However, the West Portland seat and 3 others are in a precarious position pending court decisions on the status of dual citizens elected to office. The controversy began immediately following the September 2007 election, when a PNP challenger filed a suit against an elected JLP member of parliament (MP). The JLP MP held dual citizenship (Jamaican and U.S.) at the time he sought office, ostensibly violating a Jamaican constitutional clause barring from office any who "hold allegiance to a foreign entity." In the wake of the lawsuit, the JLP MP renounced his U.S. citizenship, but a court ruled that a by-election for the seat must be held. The PNP challenger appealed the ruling, seeking to be directly appointed to the seat. A determination on the case was delayed from November 2008 to "early 2009," though there has been no ruling as yet. In the interim, all elected MPs retain their seats. The pending court ruling may affect the outcomes of similar legal challenges filed against three other JLP MPs. If the JLP's thin parliamentary majority is imperiled, PM Golding may be forced to call a snap general election.

¶19. (SBU) Jamaica traditionally has sought to leverage its small-nation influence through multilateralism via CARICOM, the G77, and the Non-Aligned Movement. The country maintains cordial relations with Cuba. Jamaica sees itself as a spokesman for smaller economies, particularly island states, and pushes for special and differential treatment for small economies in the FTAA and the WTO. As the most populous English-speaking CARICOM member (only Haiti is larger), Jamaica also views itself as a CARICOM leader, though Trinidad and Tobago's growing economic power has eroded Jamaica's influence within the organization. Nonetheless, this relatively small country wields significant international influence and prestige, and enjoys a status beyond its size in many international fora.

Economic Background

¶10. (SBU) Jamaica's gross domestic product (GDP) is valued at USD 12.77 billion and the economy is considered to be in the lower-middle income status. It relies heavily on the services sector, which accounts for about 60 percent of GDP. The largest foreign exchange earners are tourism and remittances, at USD 2 billion. Tourism numbers for 2007 reached 3 million visitors, an increase from 2 million in 1998. The country benefited from USD 779 million in direct foreign investment in 2007 (down - from USD 882

million in 2006), including several major investments in the tourism sector by Spanish firms.

¶11. (SBU) The country benefits from ample water supplies and a climate conducive to agriculture and tourism. Jamaica has been able to develop niche markets in value added agri-business such as Blue Mountain coffee and high quality rums. However, periodic hurricanes have damaged tourism revenue as well as agriculture outputs. Although Jamaica recovered from the devastation of Hurricane Ivan in 2004, it suffered close to USD 300 million in damages, mostly to crops and infrastructure, when Hurricane Dean hit the island in ¶2007. Tropical Storm Gustav in August 2008 damaged agriculture as well, especially export agriculture sectors. The shock to banana exports was so bad that the sole exporter, Jamaica Producers Group, decided to exit the banana export business. Gustav also caused significant infrastructure damage to roads and bridges, including completely washing out a bridge just outside of Kingston. Total damage caused by Gustav is estimated at USD 214 million.

¶12. (SBU) Overall, the economy faces several long-term challenges which have caused years of anemic economic growth averaging about 1 percent. Large-scale unemployment, especially among the unskilled population, serious crime problems, including gang violence related to the drug trade, lack of available credit and an extremely high debt burden hinder growth and erode investor confidence. The government debt is 110 percent of GDP, making Jamaica the fourth most indebted country in the world. Almost 55 cents on every dollar of revenue earned by the Government of Jamaica (GOJ) goes to debt servicing, which limits the government's ability to invest in infrastructure improvement or pay for public services such as security, education, and health care. Low tax compliance rates, hovering at about 45 percent, worsen the problem of limited revenue.

Trade and International Investment

¶13. (SBU) Prime Minister Golding generally welcomes direct foreign investment and maintains that Jamaica will only resolve its debt problems if it can grow its economy. He has called for cutting corporate tax rates and reducing bureaucratic red tape that hinders investment. Overall, GOJ economic policies encourage foreign investment in areas that earn or save foreign exchange, generate employment, and use local raw materials. The government provides a wide range of incentives to investors, including remittance facilities to assist them in repatriating funds to the country of origin; tax holidays which defer taxes; and duty-free access for machinery and raw materials imported for approved enterprises.

¶14. (SBU) The United States is Jamaica's primary trading partner. In 2007, U.S. exports to Jamaica were an estimated USD 2.7 billion, representing almost 40 percent of Jamaica's total imports. U.S. imports from Jamaica were an estimated USD 797 million. Some of the major import categories were petroleum, grains, machinery and transport equipment. The United States has been Jamaica's principal export market over the last two decades. Jamaica exports mostly crude materials, chemicals, and food to the United States. Tourism, bauxite/alumina, and remittances account for most of the country's foreign exchange earnings. Uncompetitive traditional agricultural exports - bananas and sugar - face the impending end of preferential regimes. The once flourishing apparel industry also virtually has collapsed.

Social Repercussions of Economic Downturn

¶15. (SBU) The spiraling cost of living is undermining social and economic stability in Jamaica. Inflation hit 17 percent in 2008 and shows little sign of abating. There is a confluence of factors underlying the upward movement in prices, chief among them the steep decline in the Jamaican currency. The Jamaican dollar has depreciated by almost 10 percent since the beginning of 2009, adding to the 6 percent between September and December last year. This foreign exchange market instability has significant implications for this import-dependent country. The current exchange rate is over JD 89 to USD 1

Environment

¶17. (SBU) Jamaica's economy is heavily dependent on the island's fragile natural resources, given that tourism, bauxite and alumina production, and agriculture provide the bulk of foreign exchange earnings. Large-scale hotel and resort developments under construction along the north coast will severely strain the island's natural resources and infrastructure. Environmental degradation and resource depletion are serious threats to sustainable economic growth in Jamaica. The most pressing environmental challenges affecting the island are coastal water quality (some estimate 80 percent of coral reefs have perished), deforestation, and lack of biodiversity protection. Jamaica needs to develop a long-term environmental protection scheme that works with the private sector.

Transnational Crime and Narcotics

¶18. (SBU) Jamaica is a transit point for South American cocaine en route to the United States. It is also the largest Caribbean producer and exporter of cannabis. The Government of Jamaica (GOJ) has a National Drug Control Strategy in place that covers both supply and demand reduction. The murder rate in Jamaica has increased steadily since 2002 with well over 1600 killings annually, while the justice system has been unable to keep up, with only 45 trials per year on average. Based on their past experiences, most civilians fear that at best, the authorities can't protect them, and at worst, are colluding with criminals, leading citizens to avoid giving evidence or witness testimonies. The police are only able to resolve (make arrests) in thirty-four percent of homicides annually, and they only convict perpetrators in five percent of the homicide cases. This leads both the public and police to doubt the effectiveness of the criminal justice system leading to vigilantism, which only exacerbates the cycle of violence.

¶19. (SBU) The GOJ has intensified and focused its law enforcement efforts on more effectively disrupting the trafficking of large amounts of cocaine in Jamaica and throughout its territorial waters. The GOJ also has fully cooperated in several major international narcotics law enforcement initiatives, which have resulted in the arrest and extradition to the United States of high-profile Jamaican, Colombian, Bahamian, and Panamanian narcotics traffickers responsible for the manufacture, trans-shipment, and distribution of vast amounts of cocaine throughout the Central Caribbean region.

¶20. (SBU) The Port Authority of Jamaica (PAJ) has procured and installed non-intrusive inspection equipment, including mobile gamma imaging machines, x-ray machines for high-density cargo, and pallet machine and closed-circuit television surveillance systems for the Kingston and Montego Bay ports. While the Container Terminal is relatively well protected, and is now a beneficiary of the U.S. Container Security Initiative, its neighbor Kingston Wharf, a break bulk facility, is plagued with security problems that facilitate contraband smuggling. The Jamaican Constabulary Force (JCF) Narcotics Vettered Unit (NVU) has taken steps to increase its evidence and intelligence gathering capabilities to better investigate major narcotics dealers and crime-lords. In addition, the GOJ has agreed to the establishment of an International Airport Interdiction Task Force comprised of Jamaican, U.S., UK, and Canadian law enforcement elements which will focus on narcotics trafficking and illegal migration at the country's two major international airports.

¶21. (SBU) The military, or Jamaica Defence Force (JDF), devotes considerable resources to the internal security mission in Jamaica and conducts operations with/in support of the JCF. One such ongoing operation is "Operation Kingfish," which targets high level criminals in Jamaica. Other important missions are Counter-Drug (marijuana eradication and maritime interdiction) and humanitarian assistance in times of natural disaster (primarily hurricanes and flooding). The U.S. conducts joint exercises and provides training opportunities for JDF officials.

Travel and Migration

122. (SBU) Facilitating legal migration and deterring illegal movement are key missions for Embassy Kingston. Despite its small size, Jamaica is a major source of legal and illegal immigrants to the United States. Embassy Kingston is one of the busiest consular posts in the Western Hemisphere: the consular section issues approximately 7,000 immigrant visas, and receives an average of 100,000 applications for nonimmigrant visas per year. Travel is not one-way. Well over 1.5 million Americans visit Jamaica each year, most as tourists. In addition, over twenty thousand U.S. citizens are permanent residents on the island.

HIV/AIDS

123. (SBU) The Caribbean region's HIV prevalence rate of approximately 2.4 percent is second only to sub-Saharan Africa. In Jamaica, about 3 percent of antenatal clinic and 1.5 percent of the general population test positive for HIV, according to GOJ statistics. The early average age of first sexual encounter, multiple partners among adolescents, and the stigma of homosexuality in Jamaican culture, all contribute to the potential risks for an accelerating epidemic in the Jamaican population. There is a high degree of discrimination against those living with HIV/AIDS, regardless of whether they are men, women or children. Even if the disease is successfully contained, HIV will continue to have serious economic consequences. According to the University of the West Indies Health Economics Unit, if the escalation continues at its present rate, the estimated economic cost in five years will equal 6.5 percent of GDP.

Wehrli